

# Queensland Health Fact Sheet 1

## Getting involved

### Working with the treatment team

Queensland Health acknowledges the significant contribution that family and carers make in supporting consumers on their journey to recovery, and promotes carer involvement in care planning and treatment. It is also recognised that carers have their own specific needs that are separate from consumers.

A **carer** may be a friend, a neighbour or a family member. Carers are defined by the Queensland Government Carer Recognition Policy as a person of any age who, without being paid, cares for another person who needs ongoing support because of a long-term medical condition, a mental illness, a disability, frailty or the need for palliative care. A carer may or may not be a family member and may or may not live with the person. Volunteers under the auspices of a voluntary organisation are not included.

The term **Consumer** is used within the public mental health service to describe the person for whom you care. He or she may be a family member, spouse, friend or 'significant other'.

#### Where do I begin?

In the early stages it is natural for carers to feel extremely anxious and confused. You are likely to have many questions about mental illness, as well as questions about your role in helping the consumer to recover. You may find it useful to write down your questions to take with you when you talk to the doctor or other members of the treatment team. A wealth of information and fact sheets about mental illness are also available from the mental health service, your general practitioner, libraries and the internet.

Many carers find it helpful, comforting and encouraging to access one or more local carer support groups in their community. Support groups usually have many workers and volunteers with a lived experience of mental illness, who can help carers find the right information, develop new ways of coping and learn how to support the consumer through their journey to recovery.

Once you have a clearer understanding about mental illness and its impact on the consumer, their family and friends, you may find it easier to talk to other family members and friends to identify how they can best encourage and support the consumer.

#### Ask for help for yourself

You will need to accept that, in some ways, your life has changed. Mental illness presents unique and often highly stressful challenges, for both the consumer and the entire family.

Many families find they need to learn new behaviours and coping strategies to strengthen and help them support the consumer on their journey towards recovery. While this may be a demanding process, your perseverance will be extremely valuable, for the consumer, the family and for yourself. The staff can help you access support.

#### Confidentiality and consent

Queensland Health recognises that the support and understanding of the family is vital to the long term care of the consumer, and the treatment team can help you provide appropriate support. Most consumers are happy to consent to the sharing of information regarding their diagnosis and treatment, although sometimes the consumer refuses to allow any specific information to be divulged and this right is, naturally, respected.

There are various reasons why a consumer may choose not to share specific details. For example, they may feel their relationships have been under stress or they may be unwell. Sometimes they simply wish to keep the specific details of their illness private. It may also take some time for a diagnosis to be made by the treatment team.

Regardless of the issue of consent, as a carer you may request and receive general information that will help you understand and cope with the symptoms you will already have observed. Carers are actively encouraged to provide information to the treatment team, to help them in their diagnosis and to identify the appropriate treatment. Where consent has been refused, the treatment team will, from time to time, repeat the benefits of carer and family involvement and ask the consumer to reconsider their decision.

You may also request a meeting with the doctor or another member of the treatment team if you have any specific concerns or to ask for any information you may require.

### Questions

If there is an aspect of the treatment or medication which you don't understand, or with which you disagree, it is best to ask the doctor or another member of the treatment team. They can clarify what they are doing and what they aim to achieve, and you may describe any changes you have noticed. You may also wish to ask for written information which you can read in your own time. It is important to realise that without feedback the staff or service may not recognise that an issue exists. Positive feedback regarding the service or the staff is always appreciated.

### Discharge planning and relapse prevention

You will probably want to find out how long the consumer will be in hospital, and what will happen when they are discharged. Discharge planning begins soon after admission and it is important for carers to contribute to these discussions, particularly if the consumer will live with them. You may also want to ask about other alternatives to hospital admission and what arrangements will be made for follow up care. Many carers are unable, or choose not to provide accommodation for the consumer when they are discharged. However, you can still contribute to the discussion and identify the level of support you are able to maintain.

A relapse prevention plan will also be developed to help the consumer, and you as their carer can help identify potential triggers for relapse and how you can support the consumer towards their recovery.

### Join us

Carers in Queensland are encouraged to provide formal input through representation at all levels, including individual care, service delivery, organisational and systemic policy levels. Your local mental health service can provide details on the various opportunities and how you may be able to participate.

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**Additional information for carers can be found on the Queensland Health Carers Matter website at [www.health.qld.gov.au/mhcarer](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/mhcarer)**

*Endorsed by Dr Aaron Groves  
Executive Director  
Mental Health Alcohol and Other Drugs Directorate  
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